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ABSTRACT

Through his prose and poetry, John Keats revealed much about his personal outlook and values that might be applied to a description of poets in general. Keats was fascinated by the workings of the human mind with its power to transform, connect, and communicate. He was full of curiosity, eager to relate the fragments of knowledge he acquired to his experience and imagination. At the center of his imagination was a core of key images associated with pivotal experiences from his childhood, and he relied on these images in all of his writing. He was keenly aware of the contradictions in life that exist simultaneously. Viewing himself as the embodiment of resistance, he was not content with things as they were. Rather, he resisted universal apathy, mediocrity, conformity, and institutional pressures, and sought the spiritual-a life beyond this life. As a poet, he chose to effect change within himself and thereby point the way for others; he was not interested in revolutionary, external change. (MAI)

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# From Feathers to Iron

STANLEY KUNITZ

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# FROM FEATHERS TO IRON

On Thursday, February 19, 1818, John Keats, incited by "the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of idleness," interrupted his revision of Book III of *Endymion* to compose an ebullient letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds. "My dear Reynolds," he wrote,

> I had an idea that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner—let him on a certain day read a certain Page of full Poesy or distilled Prose, and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect upon it, . . . until it becomes stale—but when will it do so? Never. When Man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting-post towards all "the two-and-thirty Palaces." How happy is such a voyage of conception, what delicious diligent Indolence! [1]

Keats was then twenty-two. Those two-and-thirty Palaces were the thirty-two "places of delight" in the Buddhist doctrine, of which he had a smattering of knowledge. He was full of curiosity and he was fascinated by the play of the mind, which evoked for him the image of the spider unreeling gossamer from her belly, with no need for more than a few contact points, some convenient leaves and twigs, on which to hang her "airy Citadel." I am correcting Keats here, with respect to gender, for apparently he was unaware that the male spider has no gift or time for spinning, busy as he is with his fatal occupation of roving lecher.

Less than a month later, on Friday, March 13, from his temporary quarters in Devonshire, where he had gone for rest and relaxation, Keats pursued his investigation of the operations of the mind in a letter to Benjamin Bailey. "Every point of thought is the centre of an intellectual world—the two uppermost thoughts in a Man's mind are the two poles of his World," he wrote, "he revolves on them and every thing is southward or northward to him through their means. We take but three steps from feathers to iron." [2]

Ever since I came across that passage in my youth, when I was about the same age as Keats, I have carried it in my head as a glowing touchstone, and walked around it, at first quite cautiously,

and examined it, and tried to fathom its cryptic radiations. Among the things it says to me is that no two minds are the same; that each mind is a self-contained universe turning on its obsessional axis; and that at the same time it is a field of dialectical energy charged by what it most affirms and most denies. I am reminded of the paradox presented early in the century by the presumption of the existence of waves of matter on the one hand and particles of light on the other. Which was the correct picture? The German physicists Heisenberg and Born solved the dilemma by asserting that both pictures were equally true. From then on, with the aid of their high mathematics, it became possible to describe quantum phenomena whichever way one chose, according to the demands of the occasion. It took but three steps from waves to particles.

I can think of nothing more miraculous than the power of the mind to transform, to connect, to communicate. Some years ago, in a state of unusual agitation, I wrote a poem that owes some of its feeling and substance to the aforementioned passage from Keats, though nobody, as far as I know, has ever detected the relationship. "Green Ways" is its title.

Let me not say it, let me not reveal
How like a god my heart begins to climb
The trellis of the crystal
In the rose-green moon;
Let me not say it, let me leave untold
This legend, while the nights snow emerald.

Let me not say it, let me not confess
How in the leaflight of my green-celled world
In self's pre-history
The blind moulds kiss;
Let me not say it, let me but endure
This ritual like feather and like star.

Let me proclaim it—human be my lot!—
How from my pit of green horse-bones
I turn, in a wilderness of sweat,
To the moon-breasted sibylline,
And lift this garland, Danger, from her throat
To blaze it in the foundries of the night.[3]

2

I remember feeling at the time, in a kind of transport, that it was not I writing the poem, but my cells, my corpuscles, translating into language the chemistry of a passion. Not until the word "feather" announced itself with absolute assurance of its welcome was I even faintly aware that Keats had somehow intruded himself into the process of the poem along with Fanny Brawne and my own life and love. A student of psychology might legitimately inquire why, if this explanation be true, Feather did not come to me as one of a pair, companioned by its given antithesis, Iron. It occurs to me —something I had never perceived before—that this is exactly what happened: in the final metaphor, of "the foundries of the night," Iron makes its obligatory appearance.

No doubt I should credit William Blake with an assist for the main ingredients of the last line, but my debt to him is fairly obvious and has been many times acknowledged. On the other hand, who but myself could know that my readings in the morphology of fungi and the history of the Irish potato famine of 1845–46 triggered some of the imagery? I do not make a habit of blabbing about my source material, but in this instance it serves a purpose, and since I can truthfully say that most of my poems are inexplicable even to myself, there is no danger of my telling all. Poetry, by its nature, is a ganglion of memories, impressions, influences. First you read the poem; then you try to read its secrets. Words themselves come to you dragging their roots behind them; roots that are as long as the history of language.

One of my convictions is that at the center of every poetic imagination is a cluster of key images which go back to the poet's childhood and which are usually associated with pivotal experiences, not necessarily traumatic. Poets are always revisiting the state of their innocence, as if to be renewed by it. Carl Jung has observed that "no one can free himself from his childhood without first generously occupying himself with it," but my own feeling is that the object is not so much to cut oneself off from one's past as to learn how to live with the child you were. That cluster of key images is the purest concentration of the self, the individuating node, the place where the persona starts. When fresh thoughts and sensations enter the mind, some of them are drawn into the gravitational field of the old life and cohere to it. Out of these combining elements, the more resistant the better, poetry happens. It is idle to weigh the intrinsic worth of the ingredients, for the special mind makes something special out of anything. In Keats'



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case, one can learn more about his quiddity by pursuing his images of fever and of ooze than by analyzing his literary sources.

A critical property of key images is that they are unalterable, being good for a lifetime. Although "the two uppermost thoughts [as opposed to images] in a Man's mind" may be somewhat less constant, given the factor of a maturing intellect, they are not likely to be unconscionably fickle in a mind of persistent character. In a letter to Bailey in the fall of 1817 Keats had written, "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination," and he never, in his cruelly brief span, wavered from that axis. Modern writers tend to shy away from such assertions of principle, but I should find it difficult to separate my idea of D. H. Lawrence from his ideas about Blood and Nature, or Yeats from his fidelity to custom and ceremony, or Eliot from his theories about the decay of civilization and the need for authority. As for myself, I once wrote:

> The manifold tissue of experience, in Whitehead's phrase, with which one is concerned presents itself with a bewildering density, an overlay of episodes and images, both public and private. What makes art possible is that one is also, at the same time, a bundle of simplicities. But modern criticism is frightened of these simplicities. The hard and inescapable phenomenon to be faced is that we are living and dying at once. My commitment is to report the dialogue. [4]

There is no way of discussing such matters without turning to Coleridge, who laid the cornerstone for our whole structure of thinking about the imagination. The imagination, he said in a celebrated paragraph of *Biographia Literaria*,

> . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order. . . .[5]

No one has better described the creative tension that produces a work of art and charges it with energy. Out of our contradictions

we build our harmonies. The loom of art requires more than one set of threads: it is the cross-stitching that holds the fabric together. As Blake remarked before Coleridge, "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence." [6] He praised the contrary mind, condemned the negative one. We are still learning that the child of negation and denial will be stillborn.

Ultimately poetry does not affect us by meeting any arbitrary tests of metrical or prosodic excellence but by satisfying our hunger for a language that crystallizes our intuitions and makes a syntax out of the crises of our survival. "Man can embody truth," wrote Yeats, "but he cannot know it." It seems to me that the truths of poetry are beyond knowledge. The fallacy is in thinking of the poem as a vessel into which experience is poured or as a skin that serves as cover to a skeleton. On the contrary, the language of poetry is ideally a body-language, inseparable from its maker's breath and living tissue. Every language of civilization has a codified vocabulary and grammar, but poetry, which traces its lineage back to song and dance, and which has never forgotten its origins, is the language of languages.

Here again Coleridge was prescient, anticipating those in our time who entertain the delusion that they have invented the concept of organic form. "The true ground of the mistake," he said with singular clarity in one of his lectures on Shakespeare,

> lies in the confounding mechanical regularity with organic form. The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material;—as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fulness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. [7]

Unfortunately, in our technocratic society, it is mechanistic form that imposes itself on our factories and cities, that puts its stamp on our war machines, that strips the earth for the sake of coal and deploys regiments of bulldozers across the rolling land to cut straight highways. Walt Whitman's dreams for the American future were

sometimes tainted by a burgeoning sense of manifest destiny, but he knew what it was that he responded to in the world around him:

> You objects that call from diffusion my meanings and give them shape!
> You light that wraps me and all things in delicate equable showers!
> You paths worn in the irregular hollows by the roadsides!
> I believe you are latent with unseen existences. . . .[5]

Poets are to be trusted only when they are thinking through their senses. Otherwise they are no more trustworthy than anybody else. Their poetry, it should be noted, is more than a form of writing, which is a comparatively late invention of the human species, not much older than Homer, who lived about 3,000 years ago. Millions of years before people began to tell about themselves on papyrus and paper, they were accumulating the wisdom of the body, a cabalistic lore, which not all the books of mankind, now or to come, will ever completely interpret. Sometimes poets travel far and bring back to us news of that other age, remembered in our blood, like pieces of a sacred fire. I think that Keats was of that company when, one Sunday in September, 1819, he wrote "To Autumn," the last of the odes, unique in its music and its majesty. Listen:

### TO AUTUMN

#### I.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

II.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
  Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
  Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
  Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
    Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
  Steady thy laden head across a brook;
  Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
    Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

III.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
  Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
  And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
    Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
      Among the river sallows, borne aloft
        Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
    And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
      Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
      The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
        And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

And Shakespeare was of that company in the furious combustion of *King Lear*. And, surely, the rhythms of Gerard Manley Hopkins were body-sprung. Your own body knows it in the lift and wrenching, the racing and responsive pulse, of his lines, as in "The Windhover," the poem he thought his best and which he therefore dedicated "To Christ our Lord":

THE WINDHOVER:

*To Christ our Lord*

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! and the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.[9]

Keats' famous cry, "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!," which has been mocked by some and condoned by others, assumes a new significance if we regard it in the context of the wisdom of the body. One of the gifts of that wisdom is the insight that in the chemistry of life the process of catabolism, the breaking down of our cells, is as essential as its anabolic counterpart. As a physician by training, Keats was fully aware of the meaning of his fevers and hemorrhages. His imagination, unable to reject the dreadful fact of his mortality, ended by embracing it. Toward the last he wrote, "Verse, Fame, and Beauty are intense indeed,/ But Death intenser." In Taoist doctrine we are told that division is the same as creation, creation is the same as destruction,

the very lesson that Bakunin taught as the prologue to his anarchistic revolution and that Dada made programmatic for Western art. Some of the finest art of the century incorporates certain aspects of that principle.

"When you begin a picture," said Picasso,

> you often make some pretty discoveries. You must be on guard against these. Destroy the thing, do it over several times. In each destroying of a beautiful discovery, the artist does not really suppress it, but rather transforms it, condenses it, makes it more substantial. What comes out in the end is the result of discarded finds. Otherwise, you become your own connoisseur. I sell myself nothing! [10]

Yeats concluded his poignant and yet triumphant poem, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," in which he sums up the story of the life of the imagination, with lines that by now must have entered into the consciousness of every living poet:

> Those masterful images because complete
> Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
> A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
> Old kettles, old bottles, old rags, that raving slut
> Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
> I must lie down where all the ladders start,
> In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.[11]

How many steps from that Yeatsian epiphany to a comprehension of the pathos of San Clemente? Not more than three, I hazard, for those who are ready. One difference between poets and politicians is that poets keep building their metaphors out of the ruins of their existence. Another is that politicians fear poets, but poets (at least in this country) do not fear politicians—though they have learned to distrust them. They tend to agree with old John Adams that "Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all His laws." [12] Poets are subversives, but they are not really revolutionaries, for revolutionaries are concerned with changing others, while poets want most of all to change themselves.

We began this circuitous excursion, you will recall, in the footsteps of Keats, who proposed that "any one grand and spiritual

passage" can serve "as a starting-post towards all 'the two-and-thirty Palaces.' " He himself provided the impetus with his speculation beginning "Every point of thought is the centre of an intellectual world" and ending with his enigmatic assertion "We take but three steps from feathers to iron."

I have let my thoughts wander where they would, in accordance with my own predilections, stimulated now and then by fresh input from my private quotation-bank, but the course pursued seems to confirm Keats' hypothesis that each mind rolls on an axis, to which all its productions are oriented. That course, I suspect, would be roughly the same, no matter where it started and under what circumstances. My early feathers have been scattered on the trail. It must be time now to strike iron, if iron has not been already struck.

In one of his most brilliant perceptions Henri Bergson saw time as resistance—resistance against everything happening at once. Comparably the poet sees himself as an embodiment of resistance—resistance against universal apathy, mediocrity, conformity, against institutional pressures to make everything look and become alike. That is why he is so involved with contraries. Long live the differences! He is not, as some would have it, preparing to settle down in Chaos, where everything *does* happen at once, for he knows too well that though Chaos is an exciting place to visit, he wouldn't want to live there. Cosmos is his other address, but the boredom soon sends him packing. What his heart really desires is neither Chaos nor Cosmos, but Mythos—a new ordering of creation.

He is not content with things as they are. How could he be, who has once visited Paradise and kept that vision alive? If it were not for his dream of perfection, which is the emblem of his life-enhancing art, and which he longs to share with others, generations of men and women would gradually sink into passivity, accepting as their lot second-rate or third-rate destinies, or worse. If one is to be taught submission, in the name of progress or national security, it is redemptive to recall the pride of one who averred that his only humility was toward "the eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty, and the Memory of great Men."

I have never agreed with the sentiment expressed by Auden in his eulogy for Yeats that "poetry makes nothing happen." No doubt "Ireland has her madness and her weather still," but it also has the memory of Keats. His poems have departed from the page and become places in a spiritual landscape. Here at home poets told

the ghastly truth about Vietnam long before the public had ears for it. Indeed, future chroniclers may record that the turning-point the peripeteia, in the history of President Johnson's administration and in the drama of our nation's commitment to the war occurred on June 14, 1965, when poets and artists converted the White House Arts Festival into a passionate fiasco. I am happy to confess I played a role in the planning of that episode.

We poets are citizens too, and most of us have never seen an ivory tower. Of course, we appreciate the unparalleled freedom we enjoy to write as we please. Thank you, Founding Fathers! At the same time we cannot help regretting that only the blessed young and a handful of incorrigible elders seem to be paying much attention to what our poems are saying. Will that be enough to change the climate of an age?

"I am the truth," said Wallace Stevens,

> since I am part of what is real, but neither more nor less than those around me. And I am imagination, in a leaden time and in a world that does not move for the weight of its own heaviness.[13]

The trouble with the old order, as it approaches its Bicentennial celebration, is that it lacks imagination. It fears imagination as it fears truth, for both of them threaten power, contribute to its unease. To stay in office, power must pretend to dignity and honor and compassion, or, failing these, to good fellowship. In its self-satisfaction it does not know it is pretending, for only imagination, which opens the doors of perception to other hearts and minds, is capable of summoning up, in Abraham Lincoln's phrase, "the better angles of our nature."

Consider the words that Lincoln spoke on April 11, 1865, in his last public statement, at the close of a bloody and terrible war, when he faced the necessity of declaring his policy for the reconstruction of the Union. He said:

> We all agree that the seceded states, so called, are out of their proper, practical relation with the Union; and that the sole object of the government, civil and military, in regard to those states is to again get them into that proper practical relation. I believe it is not only possible, but in fact, easier to do this, without deciding or even considering,

> whether these states have ever been out of the Union, than with it. Finding themselves safely at home, it would be utterly immaterial whether they had ever been abroad. Let us all join in doing the acts necessary to restoring the proper practical relations between these states and the Union; and each forever after, innocently indulge his own opinion whether, in doing the acts, he brought the states from without, into the Union, or only gave them proper assistance, they never having been out of it.[14]

In that magnanimous valedictory, delivered four days before his death, one perceives the beauty of a mind that gives sanction to the hope for amnesty and peace by greeting them and embracing them without a quibble. The poetic imagination, in government as well as in literature, does not ignore or suppress contradictions, but instead seizes the opportunity to create out of them new accommodations, new reconciliations, and new values. It was no accident that the President whom most Americans deem greatest was at once eloquent and compassionate, a man of imagination.

In these days of confusion and alarm, when we yearn for greatness again, it is appropriate to recall Keats' Shakespeare-echoing prayer: "O for a Muse of fire to ascend!"

## NOTES

[1] Lionel Trilling, ed., *The Selected Letters of John Keats* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), p. 110.

[2] Ibid., p. 117.

[3] Stanley Kunitz, *Selected Poems, 1928-1958* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1958), p. 5.

[4] *A Kind of Order, a Kind of Folly; Essays and Conversations by Stanley Kunitz* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1975), p. 123.

[5] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 2, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 12.

[6] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1927), p. 3.

[7] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Modern Library, 1951), p. 432-33.

[8] Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 150.

[9] W. H. Gardner, ed., *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 73.

[10] Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ed., *Picasso; Forty Years of His Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1939), p. 16.

[11] *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), p. 336.

[12] Quoted by Hans J. Morgenthau in "Truth and Power," *New Republic*, November 26, 1966, p. 9.

[13] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Knopf, 1951), p. 63.

[14] Roy P. Basler, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1946), p. 799.

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*Randall Jarrell*, by Karl Shapiro. With a bibliography of Jarrell materials in the collections of the Library of Congress. 1967. 47 p. LC 29.9:Sh2. 70 cents.

*Recent American Fiction*, by Saul Bellow. 1963. 12 p.•

*Robert Frost: A Backward Look*, by Louis Untermeyer. With a selective bibliography. 1964. 40 p. Out of print.

*Robert Frost: Lectures on the Centennial of His Birth*. 1975. 74 p. LC 1.4:T18. $1.55.

"In- and Outdoor Schooling"; Robert Frost and the Classics, by Helen Bacon. "Toward the Source"; the Self-Realization of Robert Frost, 1911–1912, by Peter Davison. Robert Frost's "Enigmatical Reserve"; the Poet as Teacher and Preacher, by Robert Pack. "Inner Weather"; Robert Frost as a Metaphysical Poet, by Allen Tate.

*Saint-John Perse: Praise and Presence*, by Pierre Emmanuel. With a bibliography. 1971. 82 p. LC 29.9:P43. 90 cents.

*Spinning the Crystal Ball; Some Guesses at the Future of American Poetry*, by James Dickey. 1967. 22 p. LC 1.14:D55. 40 cents.

*The Theme of the Joseph Novels*, by Thomas Mann. 1943. 23 p.•

*The Translation of Poetry*. Address by Allen Tate and panel discussion presented at the International Poetry Festival held at the Library of Congress, April 13–15, 1970. 1972. 40 p. LC 29.9:T18. 60 cents.

*Three Views of the Novel*. 1957. 41 p.•

The Biographical Novel, by Irving Stone. Remarks on the Novel, by John O'Hara. The Historical Novel, by MacKinlay Kantor.

*Two Lectures*. Leftovers: a CARE Package, by William Stafford. From Anne to Marianne: Some Women in American Poetry, by Josephine Jacobsen. 1973. LC 1.14:ST1. 55 cents.

*Walt Whitman: Man, Poet, Philosopher*. 1955, reissued 1969. 53 p. LC 29.2:W59/2. 65 cents.

The Man, by Gay Wilson Allen. The Poet, by Mark Van Doren. The Philosopher, by David Daiches.

*The War and the Future*, by Thomas Mann. 1944. 23 p.•

*Ways of Misunderstanding Poetry*, by Reed Whittemore. 1965. 13 p.•

*Willa Cather: The Paradox of Success*, by Leon Edel. 1960. 17 p.•

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